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# GENDERQUEER

Julian Honkasalo

**LIKE QUEER, THE** term *genderqueer* first emerged in North American, urban activist spaces, clubs and bars in the 1990s. In the early days of the HIV/AIDS crisis, direct action organizations, such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and Queer Nation, contributed to the birth of new, radical forms of queerness as opposed to respectable assimilationist gay politics. When academic theorists first endorsed the term *queer* in the early 1990s, it often signified sexual subversion, anti-heteronormativity, and resistance to stigmatization and oppression based on sexual identity and desire (Kornak 2015). As Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* were published in 1990, both works were widely interpreted by gay and lesbian studies scholars as critiques of heterosexual power structures, with gender performativity being primarily an aspect of subversive sexual identity.

*Genderqueer* was preceded by other, somewhat similar terms, such as *genderfuck*, and *genderbender*, which both originated in subversive gay, lesbian, and cross-dresser BDSM-communities. In the early days of 1990s direct action trans activism and Internet Listservs, such as Hotmail, yahoo, and AOL-groups, *genderqueer* was not necessarily an identity category, but rather a concept that aimed to disclose and resist the violence of the heteronormative, cisnormative and often homonormative binary gender system (Stryker 2008).

Activist and scholar Riki Anne Wilchins (2017, 2; 2019, xi) claims to be the first person to have used the term *genderqueer*. In fact, in the

1995 issue of *In Your Face*, a zine newsletter of the direct action organization Transsexual Menace, Wilchins (1995) uses the terms “gender” and “queer” merged into “genderqueer” to denote all kinds of subversion and resistance to the normative conception according to which a person is always *either male or female* (today called cisnormativity):

It’s about all of us who are *genderqueer*: diesel dykes and stone butches, leatherqueens and radical fairies, nelly fags, crossdressers, intersexed, transsexuals, transvestites, transgendered, transgressively gendered, intersexed, and those of us whose gender expressions are so complex they haven’t even been named yet. (Wilchins 1995, 4; italics added)

Although Wilchins did use the term “genderqueer,” in print, in the zine quoted above, also many other trans activists and academics, such as Sandy Stone (1991), Leslie Feinberg (1992), Kate Bornstein (1994), and Susan Stryker (1994), had used similar nouns, adjectives, and verbs already earlier, such as “queer gender,” “gender queer,” “gender outlaw,” and “monster” to signify resistance to the gender binary and gender oppression. All of these terms originated in North American, urban, activist spaces. The direct action group Transgender Nation, for instance, which was founded by Anne Ogborn, Susan Stryker, and Christine Taylor in San Francisco in 1992, had used the term “gender queer” as opposed to “orientation queer” as a political concept (Stryker 2008, 147; see also, Steinbock 2019).

As an academic concept, *genderqueer* gained some academic popularity with the publication of the edited volume *GenderQueer: Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary* (2002), by Clare Howell and colleagues. Two years later, in a non-academic setting, New York-based journalist and novelist Elizabeth Cline (2004) wrote a story in the *Village Voice*, titled “Transmale Nation,” which further contributed to the mainstreaming of the term. In this context, Cline refers to the “genderqueer generation” and uses *genderqueer* as a pick-and-choose umbrella term. With an intertextual reference to Aldous Huxley’s dystopian novel *Brave New World*, Cline writes:

In this brave new world, you can be a transmale who goes “no-ho” (meaning no hormones) or “low-ho,” and “no-op” (no surgery) – or you can be a genderqueer who has top surgery, identifies as a woman, and goes by the pronoun *he*. The possibilities are endless. (Cline 2004)

In a letter to the editor of *Village Voice*, titled “TransMistake,” Sel J. Wahgn (2004) points out the heterosexist and racial bias in Cline’s story:

I am writing you in reference to the article “Transmale Nation,” by Elizabeth Cline that was published in the June 23–29, 2004 issue, the “Queer Issue.” First of all, it is extremely problematic that all four articles of the “Queer Issue,” which is supposedly reflecting the cultural diversity of New York City, were written by white people [...]. Cline’s conflation of “transmen” and “genderqueer” is also inaccurate [...] transmen started complicating the gender binary and publicly coming out en masse as transsexual/transgendered since the late 1980s and early 1990s – this is evident in community organizations such as FTMI, American Boyz and the *True Spirit* conferences. (Wahgn 2004; italics in the original)

When attempting to trace the multiple origins of *genderqueer* as a concept, it is important to stress that before anyone claimed to have coined the term, black and Latinx activists since the 1960s – such as Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy (and many more whose names have not been recorded in written history), had used terms, such as “gay,” “street queen,” and “sister” to signify resistance against the gender binary, class oppression, US imperialism, and violence against sex workers. For this generation of activist, “gay” did not predominantly signify sexual identity. By the 1980s, the black American Ballroom culture had also launched several terms of resistance, creativity, and play that signified transgression of not only the gender binary, but also normative kinship structures. These included terms such as “femme queen” and “mother” (Bailey 2013; Gossett et al. 2017). Furthermore, nonbinary and non-normative genders have always existed throughout human cultural history (Richards et al. 2017).

While *genderqueer* was a powerful tool for exposing and undoing both heteronormative and cisnormative notions of gender and sexuality, in the early and mid-1990s direct action trans activist contexts, the concept later lost some of its popularity as it did not easily translate into a human rights litigation framework of LGB organizing that in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century would develop into the US gay marriage equality movement.

On the other hand, by the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *genderqueer* had been widely replaced by the term *nonbinary* on social media, even though the terms are not synonymous. At this time, *genderqueer* and *nonbinary* became gradually commodified by the US multi-billion fashion industry. In this specific context, fashion houses, style magazines, and clothing companies marketed the term as an identity category, signifying a liberal, chic, urban lifestyle of personality and uniqueness. In popular representations, gender was no longer understood as *performative* (as in Butler 1990), but instead, an individual, voluntary and often theatrical *performance*. Queer and trans communities of color for instance have criticized the social media, mainstream media, and the US entertainment industry's representation of genderqueer and nonbinary identity as predominantly white, with traditionally masculine clothing (such as suits and ties) and short haircuts regarded as non-normative or gender neutral. Masculine access and privilege thus become concealed as "neutral," whereas femininity is regarded as gendered (Simmons 2018; see also, Dahl 2017). Commenting on the systemic violence faced by black trans women, and endorsing black trans feminine beauty as politically radical, artist Juliana Huxtable states in an interview with Che Gossett:

Passing is a means to safety, the ability to navigate the world with a bit of rest. It's so very different from what a lot of white trans people experience. I think sometimes it's easier for them to operate in a sort of genderqueer/genderpunk way, but as a privilege. You're allowed to operate in the space of gender variance. But that space for us can really be – and feel – like a prison. (Gossett and Huxtable 2017, 53–4)

A few years later, in 2018 QTPoC activists on Twitter and Instagram created the hashtag #nonbinaryisntwhite to call attention to the lack of intersectionality in mainstream representations of nonbinary identity.

Another challenge of both the terms *genderqueer* and *nonbinary* in the contemporary context are their stark definition as opposites to “binary” and “cis-,” which runs the risk of either producing new normativities (i.e. that only nonbinary persons are non-normative) or stabilizing binary distinctions of so-called sex/gender (i.e. that cis-gender gays, lesbians or bisexual persons for instance cannot have a non-normative gender presentation or identity). Here it may be useful to think about conceptual origins and resistance as multiple. To quote Michel Foucault (1982):

Rather than analyzing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, it consists of analyzing power relations through the antagonism of strategies [...]. And, in order to understand what power relations are all about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations. (Foucault 1982, 780)

Hence, despite challenges and restrictions related to the shallowness of the contemporary meaning of the term *genderqueer*, it is nevertheless a potentially powerful, performative concept that exposes techniques, methods, and structures of power that regulate both gender and sexuality. The term also calls for recognition and respect of lives regarded as unintelligible in the cisheteronormative and neoliberal matrix of emergent far-right and neo-fascist mobilization. As anti-gender mobilization across Europe, the United States, and Latin America seek to reject the entire concept of *gender* as pseudo-scientific and as part of what these movements label as *gender ideology* or propaganda (Kuhar and Patternotte 2017), it becomes increasingly important to ask what kind of interruptive work do concepts such as *genderqueer* or *nonbinary* do in the contemporary context? In what ways does power shift its focus of operation across geographical and intersectional differences?

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